

MOVING AWAY FROM GENERALIZING A GENERATION

The triumph of the individual

By Anne Blackhurst

AS A PROFESSOR in a graduate program in college student affairs, I think of myself as an expert on the college experience. For the past twelve years, I have taught courses and conducted research on college students, their learning and development, the campus environment, and trends in higher education. Like any good scholar, I make it a point to stay abreast of new developments in my field, including changes in demographics, social trends, and public opinion and the ways in which such changes shape distinct generations of college students. As a result, I am familiar with both the research and the conventional wisdom about the current generation of college students, generally referred to as the millennial generation. Despite a career devoted to studying college students and their salient characteristics, it is in the process of sending my own son off to college that I recognize the greatest influence on my thinking about what it means to understand today's undergraduates.

BORN in 1986, my son is a member of the cohort heralded by Howe and Strauss as "the next great generation." By the late 1990s, trend spotters had characterized millennials—the generation born between 1982 and 2000—as cooperative, responsible, achievement-oriented, future-focused, and altruistic. Experts expected millennials to break sharply from the cynicism and apathy of their Generation X predecessors and fill the generational void left by the demise of the G.I. generation—the most upbeat, engaged, civically minded generation in recent history. Though there were murmurs of concern, most notably about the potential consequences of comparatively protected, highly structured,

increasingly sedentary, and overstimulated childhoods, experts believed millennials would reverse decades of steady increases in teenage sexual activity, alcohol and drug use, violence, and other negative behaviors.

Naturally, not all of the popular portrayals of millennials described my son's pre-college experiences. He did not sign a virginity pledge in high school (though neither was he sexually active—as far as I know). He did not join a religious youth group or wear a "What Would Jesus Do?" bracelet. He did participate in a community service program in junior high school, though his group's choice of service project—lobbying lawmakers to legalize fireworks in our state—hardly seemed on a par with aiding the homeless or cleaning up the environment.

Although he earned good grades in high school while maintaining a part-time job and participating in a few cocurricular activities, his schedule permitted ample time for lounging on the couch, playing video games, and watching television. Indeed, despite his generation's well-documented affinity for digital technology in all of its forms, my son often lounged on the couch with a good book. (Somewhat surprisingly, in light of all that lounging, he did not fulfill the dire predictions about his generation's increasing incidence of adolescent obesity.)

While I knew that my son did not fit neatly into every characterization of his generation, I felt fairly comfortable with the conventional wisdom about his cohort. After all, the popular conception of millennials as respectful of authority, team-oriented, high-achieving, responsible, and close to their parents seemed to accurately describe my son and his peer group. In addition, as a teacher and scholar of trends in higher education,

I was confident of the need to consider how the characteristics and perspectives of the millennial generation might be different from those of previous generations.

MY COMFORT and confidence evaporated abruptly this past fall as my son enrolled in college amid a flurry of troubling reports about the state of today's undergraduates—just in time for me to be labeled a “helicopter parent.”

The new picture of today's college students is anything but rosy and seems to stand in contrast to the positive characteristics of the millennial generation. Recent reports depict alarming images of college students' binge drinking, methamphetamine use, excessive credit card debt, online gaming addiction, mental illness, and suicide. Less alarming, perhaps, but still disturbing are reports of college and university students' academic unpreparedness, underdeveloped interpersonal skills, short attention spans, unrealistic expectations, and demanding or even disrespectful behavior. Suddenly, the next great generation seems more like a generation in crisis, ill equipped to manage daily life, let alone to change the world.

Similar dire news seems to dog each new generation of college student. As a university professor, I study these trends, but it is different when there is a face attached to the trends—the face of my son. My impulse to protect him is labeled problematic in both the popular media and higher education literature, where reports about the dangers of college life are juxtaposed with commentaries criticizing parents who hover over their undergraduate offspring. In fact, from producer David Sloan's episode of *20/20* to Helen Johnson's article *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, the media depict helicopter moms as the greatest danger facing today's undergraduates. Issues that I am accustomed to considering primarily from a dispassionate, academic perspective are suddenly very personal.

Like virtually everyone who works in higher education, I chuckle at the irony of today's parents—who in their own youth were largely responsible for ending more than 300 years of *in loco parentis*—but now expect (even demand) to be intimately involved in their children's lives at college. Who hasn't shuddered at stories of parents who storm college campuses to protest their children's grades or demand a residence hall upgrade? And who would disagree with the idea that too much parental interference inhibits the maturation process that is the hallmark of the college experience? In light of the horror stories, including one reported by Eric Wills, it's easy to sympathize with administrators at the University of Vermont, who recently hired bouncers to keep well-meaning but interfering parents at bay during student orientation.

I know enough to understand that I shouldn't insist on attending my son's academic advising appointments or volunteer to sit in on his classes and take notes when he can't attend. Beyond such extreme examples, though, my stance is more than a little wishy-washy. How much parental contact is too much? Precisely when do support and guidance become hovering? Despite my position as an authority on the college experience, I find myself unable to answer these questions as unequivocally as the higher education professionals who are quoted in the articles I read. Instead, I've responded to the criticism of helicopter parents by questioning my own behavior. After all, I, of all people, certainly do not want to behave in ways that might stunt my son's emerging sense of competence or autonomy.

DURING his junior year of high school, as we visited the campuses my son was considering, I mentally gave myself points for encouraging him to make his own choice—even when his choice was different from mine. At the same time, I must confess that his decision to attend the large, urban university in our state intensified my impulse to engage in behaviors I'm quite sure constitute hovering.

Since we said good-bye outside his residence hall in early September, I have second-guessed every phone call. Nonetheless, we have talked by cell phone several times a week (and, on more than one occasion, several times in a single day). I forced myself to wait the recommended six weeks before making the two-hour trip to bring him home for a weekend visit, but honesty requires me to reveal that twice during those six weeks I drove four hours round trip to take him out to dinner. I cannot imagine the circumstances under which I would behave in ways that might require the intervention of a bouncer, but I also know that the relationship I hope to maintain with my son during the next four years is much more intimate than the relationship my parents envisioned when they dropped me off at college nearly thirty years ago.

While I wrestle with these issues, my son adjusts to college life in ways that resist easy categorization. More than halfway through his first semester, he still has not joined a campus religious organization, though neither is he slamming meth. The D+ he received on his first college exam was substantially lower than he hoped for, but he's done exceptionally well on his writing assignments. Lured by the promise of free pizza, he did sign up for several credit cards, but he's confided that he thinks it's best if I cut them up when they arrive in the mail. And although I suspect I'd be horrified by the amount of time he spends playing fantasy football and video games, I'm also quite sure it's nothing approaching an addiction.

He called me for help on deciphering his cable TV bill, but he otherwise managed to navigate the first few months of college without my intervention. In a bout of homesickness, he sent me an e-mail I'll treasure forever (signed "your very grateful son"), but he rarely responds to the frequent messages I send him. While he later acknowledged feeling tearful as he wrote his e-mail missive, he shows no signs of depression or any other debilitating emotional or mental health concerns. It is much too early to know whether he or his generation will accomplish anything approaching greatness, but for now, he seems to be doing just fine.

MEANWHILE, I continue to struggle. Not so much with the adjustment of having my only child leave home—though at times the loss feels overwhelming. Mostly, I struggle to make sense of my experience and how it might help me become both a better educator and a better parent. What are the lessons for a professor in a student affairs graduate program who is preparing the next generation of higher education professionals? What are the lessons for current professionals who are trying to understand their role in the lives of today's students and their parents? What are the lessons for those of us who have raised this generation of students as we try to reconcile what we think we know about our children with the disturbing images of campus life and the unflattering depiction of overinvolved parents?

As I ponder these questions, I'm struck by the realization that perhaps it is not really possible to be an expert on an entire generation of students or parents. While it is possible to identify common themes in the backgrounds and characteristics of student populations, each student is a unique variation on those themes. We're quick to acknowledge that the labels don't apply to everyone, but we often miss the much more important point that they don't really describe anyone. If the labels have value at all, it is in their ability to focus our attention on the particular cultural and societal forces that shape the students who come to our campuses—and on how we might need to alter our educational and parenting practices as a result.

Too often, the labels get attached to students in ways that prevent us from fulfilling our role as educators. Labels become a way of viewing students as deficient rather than simply different from previous generations. As a result, we

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may rule out possibilities or fail to consider them altogether because our vision of today's students is limited by our conception of them as fragile, undisciplined, or uninterested in intellectual pursuits. We may fail to challenge our students—and support them—in ways that will help them reach their potential.

IT IS MY SON who answered my most challenging questions. Driving back to campus after his weekend visit, we chatted about his impressions of the college experience and what he's learned in college so far. In addition to speaking with enthusiasm about the friends he's made and his newly formed intramural basketball team, he spoke with passion about his global history course and what he's learning about important world events—among them the Cultural Revolution in China and the Cold War. What struck me most clearly as he spoke is that apart from learning about the events themselves, my son is learning that he is the kind of person who *enjoys* studying global history. His shy, sideways glance and sheepish grin told me we were both thinking the same thing: Who would have guessed? Certainly not him—or me.

In addition to rethinking my role as an expert on today's generation of college students, I realize I am no longer an expert on my own son. It is relatively easy for me to see how the labels and broad generalizations about my son's generation are limiting and constraining. It has taken me longer to understand that my own assumptions about him might be equally restrictive. Already a different person than he was eight weeks ago, my son needs the freedom to continue to grow and develop. Rather than react to him in ways that no longer fit who he is or wants to be, it is important for me to communicate that I trust his emerging vision of himself. Rather than think of myself as an expert, perhaps I need to see myself as a student—completely open to discovering who my son will become as he learns more about himself and his place in the world. If his first nineteen years are any indication, he will approach the next four years with a style that is distinctly his own. My son reminds me that behind the labels and generalizations, the millennial generation is full of emerging individuals.

NOTES

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